

Open access: effective measures to put UK research online under threat?

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The universities of the UK should not squander the opportunity to put in place an effective mechanism for making their published research freely available.

A great deal of water has passed under the bridge in the two years since the UK government [reinvigorated its push towards open access](#) – making publicly funded research papers freely available online. Although there is broad agreement on the policy, vociferous debates have raged over the details of implementation. Should the UK policy favour gold open access – making research papers freely available via the journal where they are published – or green open access, where the paper (usually the author's final revision following peer review) is placed in a freely accessible university repository?

Much of the debate has revolved around efficacy and costs. It is widely believed that gold open access may be [cheaper in the long run](#) – particularly if it encourages [transparent market competition](#) – but it may be an [expensive policy during any transition](#) away from established subscription models.

The [policy implemented by Research Councils UK](#) favours gold open access but leaves the final choice to the authors. While pragmatic, this approach risks ongoing confusion in the minds of academics in what is a complex policy area.

However, moves towards open access received a significant boost earlier this year when the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – acting on behalf of equivalent bodies for the rest of the UK – announced that only papers that have been placed in institutional repositories will be considered eligible for the next Research Excellence Framework (REF), a periodic exercise that assesses the quality of the outputs of UK university departments. This is a powerful linkage because REF assessments determine how HEFCE disburses its research funds and universities take them very seriously.

When the HEFCE announced this strong Green open access mandate, it was a huge win for open access advocates. The policy requires immediate deposit of scholarly articles into an institutional repository as soon as they have passed peer review and been accepted in a journal; it has minimal allowable exemptions; and it strikes a balance between protecting publisher revenues and pushing embargo periods down to acceptable levels. All things considered, this is an eminently sensible policy, which will push the UK towards broadened access to research for all.

However, [in discussions about the implementation and monitoring of the policy](#) some institutions have raised concerns. In particular, flak has been directed at the “deposit on acceptance” portion of the mandate, as evidenced by the presence of this question in the [FAQ documents published today by HEFCE](#). It is undeniable that there is some overhead here to institutions but this is sometimes overplayed. There are so many good reasons to support this clause that it is worth listing them to make clear to institutions and researchers why they are being asked to deposit on acceptance.

The point of acceptance is the most obvious moment for researchers to deposit their work. They will, in every case, have the manuscript at the forefront of their minds and there is a firm, known date, as verified by the email or letter of acceptance from the journal publisher. The same cannot be said for the point of publication, which, in many instances, occurs months to years after the fact and is complicated by differing publication timestamps for online and print versions. So deposit at acceptance makes compliance easier as there is documentation to present for audit.

Furthermore, statistically significant findings are emerging to show that effective OA mandates are those that prescribe deposit on acceptance and not later. As a [recent study noted](#), “if the policy requires that the deposit must be done at the time of acceptance, deposit rate is significantly higher.” Instead of causing additional financial burden of overhead, deposit-on-acceptance will likely save institutions a great deal of money that would otherwise be lost in ineligible future REF submissions. If institutions desire an inexpensive, Green route to open access and want to ensure that their researchers deposit so as to be eligible for future REF assessments, they should support deposit-on-acceptance.

The final objection that has been raised is that researchers cannot be expected to undertake supposedly arduous deposit procedures. This seems disingenuous. The software deployed by institutional repositories worldwide requires only a few clicks and fields of metadata to be entered. To claim that academics cannot undertake this task themselves seems bizarre. In fact, the confusion only arises because publisher policies stipulate different conditions, meaning that there is one final step in checking compliance using a tool such as [SHERPA/RoMEO](#). If some of the most intelligent people in the world cannot understand the conditions publishers have imposed upon Green open access, the problem is most likely not at the researcher end. Fundamentally, however, the [HEFCE policy](#) is straightforward: submit journal article; check journal policy; on acceptance, deposit.

The UK has come commendably far down the road to open access. The HEFCE policy represents an extremely sensible transition strategy. To kick back on deposit-on-acceptance would undo so much of this valuable work. Of course, there are vested interests who would like to stop the spread of open access. But if academic research is supposed to benefit academics and the public, it makes little sense to heed these cries.

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